

## IN MEMORIAM

### ALBERT D. SELLSTROM

Professor Emeritus Albert Donald Sellstrom was born September 25, 1926, in Elgin, Texas. From 1958 until his retirement in 1991, Donald taught in the Department of French and Italian at The University of Texas at Austin; he was Department Chair from 1972 to 1978. Donald passed away peacefully in Austin on October 14, 2018.

Donald received his Bachelor of Arts from The University of Texas in 1947, having studied for one year at Texas Christian University. He completed his Master of Arts in English at The University of Texas in 1949, and went on to Princeton to earn an M.A. in French in 1953 and a Ph.D. in French in 1956. From 1949 to 1950, he was a Fulbright Scholar in Bordeaux.

At UT Austin, Donald served as the Graduate Advisor in French on multiple occasions and was active in course supervision and curricular reform at the undergraduate level. In the early 1980s, he was simultaneously Chair of the Faculty Council and a member of the Liberal Arts Council. In the 1960s, his service to the profession included being elected as Secretary, then Chair, of French literature sections of both the national Modern Language Association and the South-Central Modern Language Association. On Valentine's Day 1975, Donald was named *Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Palmes Académiques*, an honor bestowed by the Ministry of National Education of the French Republic for distinguished contributions to French culture and education.

A specialist in seventeenth-century French theater, philosophy, and poetics, Donald (or Sellstrom, in the context of his academic work) is recognized as a significant figure in the scholarship of the great French dramatist Pierre Corneille, whose three dozen plays include *Le Cid*, *Horace*, *Cinna*, *Polyeucte*, and *Rodogune*. Over the course of his scholarly career, Sellstrom

published articles in such prestigious journals as *Modern Language Notes*, *Romanic Review*, *French Review*, *l'Esprit créateur*, *Publications of the Modern Language Association (PMLA)*, and *Modern Philology*. In 1967, he produced an annotated critical edition of *Le Cid* for the *Masterpieces of French Literature Series* (Prentice-Hall). His influential book, *Corneille, Tasso and Modern Poetics*, appeared in 1986 with Ohio State Press.

In this volume, Sellstrom unveils Corneille's emulation of the rhetorical and generic customs—and in these senses, the essential literary enterprise—of Torquato Tasso, the celebrated Italian poet and critic of the late Renaissance. Sellstrom's completely original argument holds that Corneille's imitation of Tasso was not accidental or occasional, but deliberate and pervasive. In *Corneille, Tasso and Modern Poetics*, Sellstrom advances a reading of Corneille “as ‘modern’ in the Tassoan sense,” and reveals in Corneille “a very conscious purpose in crossing a generic frontier in order to join forces with the epic tradition in poetry.” Sellstrom's scholarly revelation is all the more remarkable given that in all of Corneille's public discourse he never mentions Tasso.

Donald Sellstrom's research is characterized by scrupulous acknowledgment of the historical, cultural, and philosophical elements of the literary works he examines. For example, in one of his articles, Sellstrom illuminates a confluence of the history of Egypt and Rome, theories of the Christian epic, the philosophy of Aristotle, and the poetics of Lucan. In another, he deftly examines multiple theorists of rhetoric and the relation of rhetoric to poetics—among them Cicero, Quintilian, Aristotle, Chapelain, La Mesnardière, and d'Aubignac—and exposes “the danger of seriously confusing rhetoric and poetics and thinking that a series of speeches, elegant and persuasive in themselves, would necessarily constitute a tragedy.”

Sellstrom's scholarship is also notable for its intellectual modesty. In his publications, one will find no overreach or overstatement. Nor will one find metaphor or aphorism employed in

support of a tenuous argument. Sellstrom's avoidance of scholarly jargon manifests his respect for the literary works he so admires; he thus rejects self-promotional maneuvers and glitzy obeisance to faddishness. His humility and integrity are likewise reflected in his frequent recognition in print of the influence and support of scholars at other institutions, in particular Marie-Odile Sweetser and Marc Fumaroli.

Over the span of two decades, Donald produced, directed, and acted in plays by seventeenth-century French authors. Staged on the UT Austin campus, the performances involved both faculty and graduate students as actors. Donald was an insightful interpreter of the playwrights, making it easy for the actors to understand their roles and to stay in character. He was also an energetic animator of the troupes. For anyone taking part in or attending these annual extravaganzas, the experience was unforgettable.

In the Spring of 1981, Donald and I reveled together as players of secondary characters in Molière's *Le Malade imaginaire*. Witnessed by packed audiences on two afternoon performances in Calhoun 100, Donald's production and co-direction of this satirical *comédie-ballet* was a sensation. One smitten fan, who recorded the play on mini-cassette from the first row of the audience, would come back months later to Donald and me and repeat our lines to us, mimicking our mannered delivery with astonishing precision. "I practiced your parts in front of the bathroom mirror," he allowed.

Donald's elevation of theater to a place of prominence in the Department of French and Italian is appreciated to this day. We now teach play production courses in both Italian and French, with performances of masterpieces such as Pirandello's *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* and Ionesco's *La Cantatrice chauve*. In addition, every other year our French graduate students

choose, produce, direct, and stage a French play that features volunteer undergraduates who sign up as actors and stage managers.

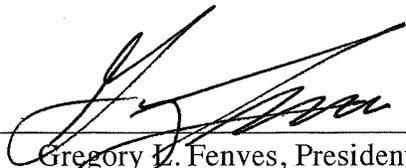
Donald's legacy also endures in the form of support for our students. For more than a decade the Donald and Eleanor Sellstrom Fund for Excellence in French and Italian has handsomely recognized the achievements of our most outstanding undergraduates, who are selected by a faculty committee.

After his retirement, Donald embarked on new scholarly projects, working at home and at the Perry-Castañeda Library. On most Wednesdays, he took the bus to campus to enjoy lunches with Hal and Carolyn Wylie, Jim Coote, and other UT Austin colleagues.

Donald Sellstrom was preceded in death by his sister Vivion Sellstrom and his brother John E. Sellstrom. He is survived by his wife Eleanor, his sons Peter, Eric (Sandra), and Oren (David Muniz), his daughter Margaret, six grandchildren, and five great-grandchildren.

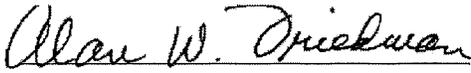
On November 3, 2018, a private graveside service was held in New Sweden, Texas, where Donald's grandparents had settled after emigrating from Sweden in the 1870s.

The University of Texas at Austin will remember Albert Donald Sellstrom for his dedication to this institution and its students, for his contributions to French scholarship and teaching, and for his generosity and humanity.



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Gregory W. Fenves, President  
The University of Texas at Austin



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Alan W. Friedman, Secretary  
The General Faculty

This memorial resolution was prepared by Professor David Birdsong.